DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 067 FL 018 994

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TITLE New Tasks for Teachers of English in Poland in Light of Social, Economic, and Political Changes.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (24th, Dublin, Ireland, March 27-30, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; Economic Change; *Educational Change; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; International Trade; Language Teachers; Political Influences; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Social Change; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Poland

ABSTRACT

The weakness of English and other language instruction in Poland is due largely to the political system after World War II. Political and economic change and gradual recognition of the importance of English have recently increased rapidly. Expanded contact with the West calls for immediate qualitative and quantitative changes in English language teaching. Proficient English-speakers are in demand, with specialists needed for conducting international business. English proficiency has become a requirement for public figures, journalists, and people working in mass media. There are now two Polish newspapers published in English. Due to a new passport policy, Polish people travel abroad more than ever. English teachers are faced with a situation where there are a large number of highly-motivated students expecting to be taught the language for a very specific, practical purpose in a relatively short time. Most English teachers have limited training and experience for this challenge. They must explore new techniques and approaches, develop curricula, seek out materials, and sometimes increase their own knowledge of the language. New courses in high demand include English for young children, English for those taking examinations and polishing skills, survival English for beginners and false-beginners, and English for business and commerce. (MSE)

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presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, Dublin, Ireland March 27-30, 1990.

NEW TASKS FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN POLAND

in light of social, economic and political changes

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of foreign languages in general, and English in particular, can hardly be considered as a strong point of the Polish people. A short outline of the situation in Poland and how it has been gradually changing over the past 30 years, shows the reason for such a disastrous state of affairs in the field of foreign languages, predestined to failure by the political system of Poland after the Second World War.

For the last few years, there have been signals of changes in Poland, both in politics and the economy, accompanied by a gradually increasing recognition of the importance of the English language, but the events of the past 12 months surpassed even the most optimistic expectations. The great boom in our contacts with the West calls for immediate, both qualitative and quantitative, changes in the field of English studies.

There is an enormous demand for proficient speakers of English for practical purposes. New style companies, often

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joint ventures, need specialists able to negotiate and conduct business with the West.

The English language has become a must for public figures, journalists and people working in mass media. At present there are two Polish newspapers published in English. Due to a new passport policy, Polish people travel abroad more than ever before as tourists, businessmen or as temporary employees for foreign companies. Not only do they all want to learn English, but they all have a very specific purpose in mind. The English teacher is faced with the following situation. All of the sudden there is a great number of highly motivated potential students of English, mostly false-beginners, expecting to be taught the language for a very specific, practical purpose in a relatively short period of time.

The new tasks for English teachers in Poland are thus reflected not only by the great amount of potential students, but the main challenge is catering to those new, very defined and specific needs.

Many English teachers willing to face up to the challenge, have found that their teaching experience up till now is only of limited use. They have to look for new ways of teaching; they must explore new approaches and adopt new techniques. They must prepare their own courses tailored to the needs of the students and then look for proper materials, often from different sources—a kind of semi-creative and a semi-compilative task. In many cases they also have to work on their English, ie to learn the language of business, commerce, etc., or simply to improve their own knowledge of general English in order to be able to teach successfully on advanced level courses which are also in

demand.

Finally, a few new-type courses, which are in great demand in Poland now, are mentioned and briefly described:

1. English for young children.
2. English for those taking exams and those wanting to keep up their skills.
3. Survival English for beginners and false-beginners.
4. English for business and commerce.

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NEW TASKS FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN POLAND
in light of social, economic and political changes

While planning today's talk, I decided to start in a traditional way, by giving a short outline of the history of teaching English in Poland. I was wondering how far back I should go. Should I start with the post-war times, late forties, the early fifties? Well, I decided that there is no point in talking about those times. Everybody knows about the iron curtain and the cold war. Those were not my times, and I consider myself lucky to know them only form my parents' and teachers' reports. It suffices to say that any contacts with the "West" were looked down upon by the authorities, and even getting letters from one's family abroad could get them in trouble. To put it shortly and mildly, they were not the times to develop or cultivate any interest in Western cultures or languages. Teaching English was a risky business then.

Later in the sixties a Western language—usually English, German or French—was introduced in secondary education, mostly in grammar schools, as a second foreign language after Russian, which was an obligatory subject introduced to pupils at the age of twelve in all elementary schools. Yet, although no longer considered a "crime", learning a Western language had still the air of something

extravagant around it—"art for art's sake". Children form the so-called "good families" were expected to be learning a Western language. Because of the lack of a real motivation to speak a foreign language since there was a very thin chance that one would need it and have to use it in a truly natural and not an artificially created situa .on, the emphasis was on learning it rather than knowing and being able to speak it. The our-daughter-has-learned-to-play-the-piano-and-she-is-taking-up-English-now kind of attitude was not uncommon. That snobbish rather than practical attitude to learning English and its results are accurately illustrated by a short joke in which somebody who has been studying English for a number of years, when asked, "Can you speak English?" confidently replies, "Yes, I don't." I am far from trying to ridicule the students or, God forbid, the language teachers of those times. Because of the political and economic situation there were no conditions for learning foreign languages. People did not have immediate reasons for doing so, plus they were much too preoccupied with the hardships of everyday life.

As time went by, more people started taking up English, but still very few of them knew what they wanted it for. Their reasons for learning English were vague. Some might have prospects of an English speaking relative coming to Poland, others would hope to be able to go abroad to visit their families or simply go as tourists.

There was a specific type of motivation among the teenagers, who fascinated with western cultures, particularly new trends in rock and pop music, were greedy

for authentic, first-hand, or shall I say "first-ear" experience, and wanted to be able to understand the song lyrics. I know a number of fluent speakers of the English language, some of them with a degree in English language or literature, who openly admit, that their teenage interests in English and American films and sons determined their future careers in the field of English studies.

To be fair, I feel I should remark here that contrary to the policies of most East European governments which banned, or at least considerably limited and heavily censored any penetration of Western influences into their native cultures, the situation in Poland was different; the country was kept relatively open to West European and American cultures. Polish theater audiences could enjoy plays of famous playwright often performed by theater groups from the West, art-lovers could visit art exhibitions of famous Western artists, movie-goers had a selection of American films to choose from, and our radio always kept teenage pop-music fans up to date with newly released records literally from all over the world, although the greatest hits invariably used to come from Great Britain or the USA.

Back to the subject of the motivation to learn English in Poland in the seventies.

Long before the awareness of the importance of speaking English spread in Poland, there had been one social group that already realized the fact and was exceptionally motivated to study English: scientists, intellectuals and academic teachers. They needed English as a tool in building their careers: broadening their knowledge by

reading foreign publications, writing their own papers in English so that they could get them published in foreign journals, being able to actively participate in international conferences held either in Poland or abroad, with English being the official language there. More and more often Polish academics had opportunities to participate in exchange programs between a Polish and a foreign university. They would go abroad either to continue their post-graduate education or to lecture there. Sometimes they got invited to do some research work. Although there was a noticeable crisis in those contacts in the early eighties due to Martial Law in Poland, they have been developing dynamically since then.

I have been involved with teaching English to University staff for the last 12 years and have always considered myself privileged (in the sense of having a more rewarding job among other teachers of English, eg in secondary schools or in higher education with the exception perhaps of working with students in English departments where by definition English is the main subject). English or another Western language was introduced in secondary and in higher education as a compulsory subject in the early sixties. With dull, overloaded programs detached from reality, unfunctional syllabuses and drab, boring books, the English teacher had very little chance of focusing his students' interest on his class. English was, to most of them, a painful "must", part of a stiff school curriculum which had been forced upon them by someone in authority. They could not change it or influence it in any way. They had to learn English in order

to get promoted to the next grade or form. One can hardly call it "a good motivation", and since it is the motivation that seems to be the most important and valuable element that a student can bring into the classroom, I—having had for all these years such highly motivated students—consider myself a fortunate and privileged teacher whose work is more rewarding and more appreciated.

Not uncommon were the cases of negligent attitudes towards English as a regular subject on the program by the teachers of other "more important" subjects. I remember a frustrated colleague from a technical university telling me about the case where she, after having refused a "pass" grade to a few students, was summoned to the dean's office and ordered to change the grades. She was told, "Those students got a pass in all the 'important' subjects, they are to become engineers not polyglots, the country needs engineers and if they ever decide they want to speak English, they can learn it later."

While talking about the possibilities of learning English in Poland one must not forget to mention evening courses arranged by numerous cultural and education-oriented societies and institutions. For many years they were the easiest, in the sense of general accessibility, and the most popular form of learning foreign languages. Anybody, irrespective of their age or education could enroll. Those courses have always been (and still are) rather cheap and thus within everybody's means. Again, everything depended on the teacher, but bearing in mind the size of the groups (usually more than 20 members), their mixed-ability

character, unintensive program (usually 90-minute classes twice a week), lack of good teaching materials and equipment for listening exercises, most of those courses looked very much the same: teaching by the grammar-translation method. The results were usually unsatisfactory. Most participants could list the tenses they "had done", some could do a simple drill-type exercise, but very few could use the language in a creative way.

Summing up this far from optimistic, but hopefully past-and-gone picture, one can not help but notice that there was an air of general dissatisfaction around the subject of teaching/ studying English and other Western languages in Poland. Unmotivated, undirected students blamed their teachers, who in turn found fault with the general system, lack of proper conditions and materials for teaching, bad syllabuses forced upon them. Both parties much too often felt helpless, frustrated without any spur to improve things. A vicious circle.

After this longish introduction which I am going to refer to later, in order to make my point clear, I would now like to talk about the present situation.

Poland in 1990 is a new Poland. I do not think there is much need to justify this statement. My country was the no. 1 news item all over the world throughout the summer of 1989, and I am sure you are all acquainted with the basic facts and the historical changes that took place then and the deep, gradual reforms that have been taking place since then.

The new political situation in Poland brought about tremendous modifications in all other fields, especially economy. I am not an expert in this field and I would rather not go into the intricacies of all the legal and economic changes, but it seems obvious (even to me) that they create a necessity to give up old stereotypes and old attitudes, to alter the general philosophy of running economic activity.

In the last couple of months, or even years (some seem to have predicted what was coming much earlier) a number of organizations and schools of a completely innovative type and character have been founded. Generally, they all aim at filling the gap between the existing approach to managing enterprise and the new requirements of a dynamically changing environment, the requirements of a modern, effective and efficient system of management and business transactions in conditions of company independence and competition.

For nearly a year, apart from my university post as a teacher of English to the academic staff, I have been involved in both devising and running English language courses at the Cracow Industrial Society, a new-type organization in Poland. I hope it is relevant here to say a few words about it, as its program illustrates new ideas and trends in the Polish economy and politics. The CIS brings together private businessmen, professional people and scholars who advocate a free market economy based on the principle of ownership and competition. The idea of establishing the society whose objective would be to foster

private economy initiative, protect private businessmen, overcome bureaucratic barriers to free market progress, and to propagate the ethos of uncorrupt, honest entrepreneurs was introduced as early as 1984. General interest in new issues as well as growing concern about finding new solutions to the old problems of the Cracow region led to the founding of the Cracow Industrial Society in 1985, which was then officially registered in September 1987—the first such organization to appear in post-war Poland. Nobody could expect then that some of the CIS founders would later become members of the first non-communist government after the Second World War, like our present Minister of Industry, who used to be the CIS's chairman. The CIS began its legal activity with free consulting serv̂ices for businessmen and with open seminars entitled "How to start out". Soon, a regular school for businessmen was set up to educate and train young managers. Among other numerous activities, the CIS provides expert opinions and presents plans for reform based on privatization, economic deregulation, limiting of taxes and elimination of protectionism. The CIS works towards the transformation of our city into a European center for tourism and "clean" industry. Members of the society authored a special economic project for the region. Recently, the CIS initiated eliminating legal restrictions in business premises trade and advocated creating industrial parks—designated areas with infrastructure for industrial and commercial firms. Following the initiative of the CIS, the Chamber of Commerce was established in Cracow in December 1989. The business contact office at the CIS

collects a wide range of data on a variety of Polish enterprises interested in exporting goods, receives orders from the West and aims at maintaining a link between Polish and Western companies as well as individual businessmen, acting as an intermediary between the parties. All negotiating, exchange of data, etc. is done in English, of course. The CIS also intends to create a Commerce and Industry Institute in Cracow of which the English language center we are promoting will be a part.

By describing the versatility of aims and interests of the Cracow Industrial Society, I tried to illustrate what is happening in my country on a large scale. For the first time there are two Polish newspapers published in English, called the *Gazeta International* and the *Warsaw Voice*, which are addressed mainly to business oriented visitors from abroad. Other Polish-language newspapers occasionally publish their sections in English, or have special supplements encouraging foreign capitals to invest in Poland, advertising new, favorable terms of business, explaining newly established laws and regulations, emphasizing political changes in the country which reduce the risk connected with investing in Poland.

The Foreign Investment Agency established in 1989, has proved a competent and helpful institution to prospective foreign investors, particularly during the "reconnaissance" stage. It offers reliable information on the legal aspects of the planned venture.

There are numerous consulting firms where the would-be investors can look through lists of proposals prepared by

the Polish Chamber of Foreign Trade. They contain offers from Polish companies, both private and state-owned of various sizes and representing various branches of industry, which would like to form joint ventures. Consulting firms not only play the part of "match-makers", they also specialize in the preparation of feasibility studies and provide general assistance in establishing new companies.

Thus, it is not surprising that there is a tremendous interest of Western businessmen in Poland, In all big centers of the country, especially Warsaw, one can see unending streams of potential investors from Western Europe coming in to check out the new situation. And what they see looks promising: prospects of further stability, convertible currency, new regulations compatible with those in the West, especially tax and profit transfer laws. Vice versa, on the Polish side there is a great interest in business contacts with the West. In the past year (and also much earlier but not on such a great scale), numerous enterprises of various sizes and types were established in Poland in link-ups with Western partners either in the form of joint ventures or in close cooperation of a differing nature.

There are a lot of people in Poland with entrepreneurial predispositions full of enthusiasm, energy, drive and above all fresh ideas. And thanks to the above-discussed changes in the Polish economy, there is finally room for them in our society. Many of them, however, although they may be graduates of good universities, lack general orientation, are not up to date with the latest changes in Polish market economy regulations, and need practical training

indispensable in a successful business managing career. I have already discussed newly founded organizations aiming at filling this gap. But there is one more, equally important need—KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

And thus in this new, practical context, it has finally dawned upon the professional part of our society, particularly those involved in building new economic structures (scientists and scholars, whom I have already mentioned realized it much earlier) that English has emerged as the main language, not only in the world of science but also in business and commerce, in exporting and exchanging both ideas and material goods.

To all newly founded firms and companies in Poland selling abroad means using English in meetings, correspondence and documentation. In commerce most companies use English as their official language, no matter where their headquarters are situated. All communication by whatever means must be carried out in English.

And so we finally arrive at the subject of THE NEW ROLE and THE NEW TASKS FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS IN POLAND in the light of the changes discussed above.

There are tow aspects to the problem: QUALITATIVE and QUANTITATIVE. Let me start with the latter, since it is more obvious. All of the sudden it has appeared that there is a considerable shortage of English teachers in Poland. There have never been too many of them, but the problem wasn't exactly painful, either. Qualified English teachers with M.A. degrees in English are produced by English departments at a number of universities in Poland after

completing five years of study. The English studies, the so-called "English Philology", have very extensive program comprising not only practical English and methodology classes but also a vast range of other subjects, such as English and American history, English and American literature, historical grammar, linguistics, etc. Specialization in one of the above-mentioned subjects comes only in the last year. thus, no matter whether one wants to pursue a career of a linguist, methodologist, translator, interpreter, English literature expert or critic, or simply a teacher of English, which is the case of most graduates, one has to follow the same, rigid program of studies.

The present situation calls for some changes: more flexibility and more specialization. The Ministry of Education is preparing a new scheme of training more English teachers in a shortened three-year program. It has not been decided yet whether they should recruit from high school graduates and be given a special degree in teaching English only—as apposed to an M.A. in English—or whether a chance to re-train for teaching English should be given to the philologists of other languages who have problems finding employment in their fields. This would mainly concern the Russian language specialists, since the popularity of this language, which was never great anyway, has considerably decreased, and so has the demand for teachers of Russian, especially that the language is being withdrawn from the elementary schools curriculum and instead there is more pressure from parents to substitute it with English.

Generally speaking, the subject of the shortage of

qualified people to teach English is more of a problem to the proper authorities than the English teachers, but it influences them in the sense that they have choices to make and usually end up terribly overworked.

I am not sure whether the term "quantitative aspect of teaching English", which I used before and which I am going to discuss now, is very accurate. Using the term, I simply meant new qualities and tasks English teachers have to incorporate in their teaching, new questions they have to answer, new recipes they must find in order to successfully face their new challenges, reflecting and resulting from the changes in Poland. Our students have changed and so have their attitudes, needs and demands. They are more motivated, more oriented towards specific goals, more aware of what they expect to be taught. Nobody asks, "Teach me some English" any longer. Their needs are immediate and clear. People stopped learning languages because they had to as a part of a larger program, or because it was fashionable. They take them up because they realize that their well-being, careers, and social status may depend on that knowledge. And for the reasons I have already discussed, the chosen language in 95% of the cases happens to be English.

Had the record of teaching general English to the "general public" in Poland over the years been more successful, the teacher's task now would still be far from easy. He would have to cater for new specific needs of his students, learn to teach English for business, commerce and other fields, find new materials, adopt new techniques of

using them or even produce his own course-scripts based on authentic materials (which has been done for many years by English teachers at technical colleges in Poland). But at least he or she would have some base to start from.

The way things are, the teacher's work is even more complicated. According to the picture I tried to sketch earlier in this talk, the level of knowledge of general English in Polish society is very low. The English teacher is faced with the situation where all of the sudden, a great number of highly motivated people expect ot be taught the language for a very specific purpose in a very short time. Even though most of them had some English at school, college, or evening courses, they usually lack even the most rudimentary knowledge of the language. One of my greatest concerns at this point in my work is to find successful ways to teach business English at the elementary level. Is it possible? If so, how much sense does it make? These are some of the questions I am hoping to find answers to at this conference.

Paradoxically—let me make a small digression here for the sake of contrasting different needs of different groups—my original students from the university staff, scientists, scholars and research workers, always seemed to have the opposite problem. Their direction in learning English is from specific to general. By the time they enroll in our courses for academics, they are quite familiar with their "professional English", they have read volumes of literature on their subject in English. Often, they themselves have written a number of papers and articles in

English, which later require only polishing from a linguistic point of view by a native English speaker or their local teacher of English. One might expect that on such courses we have to teach English for science, technology, chemistry, etc., while in fact, our students, or participants as we call them, know their professional terminology and the contexts in which it is used much better than their English philologist teachers. What they expect from us is general English on an advanced level so that they can talk freely about any subject, act and react naturally in various social contexts and take exams in general English such as the Cambridge FCE and later PCE.

In the last part of my talk I would like to say a few words about the work we have been doing in our language center at the Cracow Industrial Society.

When in the spring of 1989, three of us, all academic teachers of English, were asked to launch English courses under the Society's auspices, we enthusiastically agreed. The first question to be answered was what kind of courses. We did not want to become yet another organization running typical evening courses for the general public of unspecified aims. We wanted to offer something fresh, meeting the latest needs.

We found out that there was a great demand for the following types of courses:

1. <u>English for very young children from the age of five on</u>.
   - People have realized, mostly through their own language problems, that it is wise to start teaching their

children as early as possible in order to save them the agonies their parents are going through now. Despite financial straits and limitations in many polish families, adults are prepared to invest in starting to teach English to their kids, even at their pre-school age.

2. Advanced English for exam-takers and "keep-it-up" students.
   - Most of the generally accessible courses teach English from the beginning to intermediate or post-intermediate levels only, while due to rapidly developing contacts in many fields, there are new opportunities for professionals from non-academic circles to be employed abroad for a period of time in their own field of expertise.

     A certificate from a generally recognized exam in English such as the FCE, PCP, and TOEFL is a standard requirement. On the other hand, there are also people who, after a longer stay abroad, are already fluent speakers of English and want to "keep it up" by attending advanced English conversation classes. This type of course is similar to our university course which, however, are only open to the university staff members.

3. "Survival English" courses.
   - This is a very practical, short but intensive course for beginners or false beginners, based purely on a functional syllabus with special emphasis on the

listening comprehension skill. Now every Polish citizen can have a passport at home and people travel abroad more than ever before, for whatever reasons, and usually for a relatively short period of time. What they want to learn within just a few weeks is how to greet people, introduce themselves, buy a ticket, ask the way, make a phone call, do shopping, understand airport and railway station announcements, etc.

4. English for business and commerce.

- I have already presented the situation in Poland which justifies the enourmous interest in this type of courses. However, as I earlier mentioned, due to the generally low level of English among people going into business and commerce careers, a lot of so-called business English courses are practical courses of general English based on function-notional syllabuses with elements of business English and special emphasis on the language of meetings, conferences, business transactions, formal phone calls, telex messages and business letter writing. On the other hand, there is growing demand for "real" business courses on a more advanced level covering specialized fields in business and commerce.

These four seem to be the most burning needs of Polish learners. During the past year we spent a great deal of time planning our courses, compiling materials discussing our work and exchanging ideas. We learned a lot and we are

still learning. Mistakes were inevitable, but again we discussed them and tried to learn from them.

I am glad to be able to say that Polish teachers of the English language who are ready to face new challenges are not alone. The British Council has been of great assistance to us in almost everything. We have also recently heard from the Bell Educational Trust who offered a two-week consultancy for the Commercial Bank of Cracow with the main objective of developing a local language training resource center. A number of other British and American organizations are also interested in our work and are ready to help. We are grateful to them and we look ahead with optimism and confidence.

END

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Date Filmed

March 29, 1991